
Horizons of Desire

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ENOUGH AT LAST

Finally. At last you the setup you've wanted. Enough speed. Enough disk.

Not.

Somehow there seems to be a great law: just when you thought you had everything you needed, it's not quite enough.

Somehow you always want more speed and crunch, to scroll faster in text, run that database quicker, retouch bigger pictures, do sound and movies bigger and sharper and faster and ever more ZOWIE, always just a little more than before.

Take disk. If you've been around the field awhile, you remember when a 20-meg disk was all you could ever need. (I remember when a **64K** disk was all I could ever need.) And now, somehow, the requirements have crept upward, and keep creeping.

WANTING AND POSSIBILITY

Our society is built around wanting, wanting, wanting.

The world is not ready for people to be happy. You have to want more than you have.

Actually getting something is relinquishing a lot of your power. The money is spent, the options are gone. And you have to deal with what you got.

But then having a thing is owning possibility, owning options. "Any time I want to, I can."

I live in a town where thousands of yachts are docked. Very few of them ever seem to leave their berths. I suspect that the owners are too busy paying for them.

The MIDI industry is based around rock-star wannabes, guys endlessly improving their electrosonic setups. They never have time for the music, of course.

Having a gun in your pocket (I have never experienced this, nor do I want to, but I can imagine it) gives you a sense that you **COULD** control your destiny.

Having a computer tells you you COULD write a novel, COULD make a movie, COULD be a rock star, COULD have that endless option of youth.

Renting something doesn't have that same kind of Possibility. Because then you have to plan it all, and finish in time. The opposite of creativity, one feels.

Buying something is claiming territory. But then the territory has to be managed.

And the problem is then assimilating it to what you have already.

CONSOLIDATING THE KINGDOM

Think of a king trying to consolidate his kingdom. The borders are irregular. There's this irritating piece of another country sticking in. There are bothersome tribes to the east. We need more territory, more army, more money to feed them, more of this, more of that. Which is exactly what the other kings nearby think.

THAT OLD COMPUTER FANTASY

What did you get your computer for?

It was the sense that you could do anything. The sense of being young. The sense that as when young, the world is no longer closed in around you.

And guess what? You bought all this software, and the world DID close in around you. Because it was more to learn, more to manage, more to budget, more to be careful about. The opposite of freedom.

The freedom to DO STUFF.

Now those early fantasies, things you thought you'd be doing by simple programming, have become dratted commercial products with street prices and mazes of menus, and they're not as simple as you had hoped, and they don't tie together the way you wanted them to, and you can't afford them, and you can't afford the equipment, and you don't have time to learn their labyrinths.

NO UPPER LIMIT

People don't realize: THERE'S NO UPPER LIMIT ON COMPUTER POWER AND STORAGE-- and THE MORE YOU GET, THE MORE YOU WANT. And there'll be no such thing as ENOUGH. We get used to every new level so fast. A few years ago a 286 computer was all you needed; now everybody has to have a Pentium or a Power PC. A few years ago morphing was revolutionary; now everybody's jaded with it.

I'm not quite sure about the numbers, but the word processor I was using in the eighties-- PC-Write-- could operate in 32k, as I recall. Now this Microsoft Word thing that I grimly face takes nearly a megabyte, and wants FIVE MEG TO RUN. Well, that's okay, I can run it in my 8-meg Macintosh that I thought would be as big as I ever needed.

Unfortunately, however, I can't seem to do anything else in this 8-meg Macintosh. The graphics programs want more, more, more.

Consider the 3D animation you wanted to do. Well, the software is there, you can do it all right, there are systems galore for every machine. And what does it take? More memory than you would have imagined. And now you need a co-processor board to Make It Fly.

Except it never quite flies. Just as you upgrade your hardware, they up the ante. It needs more space, and WANTS even more.

Or your rate of storage. Originally you thought you'd accumulate maybe a couple of floppies a month, right? But that was before e-mail and Internet news groups, all growing incredibly.

My video-editing Avid needs 30 meg of RAM. And that's a low-resolution system.

It's a general principle: the more you have, the more you want.

THE FUN OF NOT PLANNING GETS EATEN AWAY

What you want is the thrill of not having to plan, not having to budget, as if you'd suddenly been given a free month with nothing to do. But then a vacation has to be planned, doesn't it?-- and so it turns into the same old rut.

So if you plan a vacation, it becomes something else. Bureaucratic. Boring. Another damn schedule to adhere to, list of goals. Don't you have enough of those every day? The fun is in not planning.

DOES GOD HAVE TO PLAN?

What if you were God? You wouldn't have to plan, would you. Or make any sacrifices. Just hang out in the sky, and by Infinitude of Brainpower make all things happen just as you want them to, without any conflicts among them, no backtracking when you find possibilities that don't fit together.

I submit that all planning requires backtracking, checking, goal-setting, sacrificing. If there are no sacrifices then you hardly wanted anything in the first place.

Being God would mean you could see ahead further, up to the limits of indeterminacy and chaos. (A God who can see beyond indeterminacy

and chaotic causation is not in today's theology.) But it would not mean that you would have to give up backtracking in your plans and designs, unless you were passive indeed about what happened.

$$f(x) = k$$

Back in school, I lived in a student co-op where on the dining-room wall was painted:

$$f(x) = k$$

I think my roommate Chuck had painted it there. I asked him what it meant.

"No matter how much food you buy, it always gets eaten," he explained. "No matter what time you leave, you always arrive the same number of minutes late."

I have pondered this for years. It seems to be true.

And it applies to computers: *No matter what equipment you get, you need more.*

NARROWING DOWN

Mr. Micawber's principle, from Dickens' *David Copperfield*: if you spend a little less than you make, happiness; if you spend a little more than you make, misery.

The eternal feedback loop: goals, resources, goals, resources. Not enough resources, give up or modify a goal. Too many goals, give up one, then another. How best use the resources? Slim the goals downward-- do all the same things, but less so, and in another way.

Orson Welles was a man who could never narrow down-- not in his designs and productions, not in his physical body. Narrowing down means acknowledging the finitude of resources, means saying there is something you cannot do. He would not admit that, and as a result he could do very little.

"Hackers don't realize they're finite till they're twenty." Learning that there is a limit to resources hits you eventually. It is hitting all governments simultaneously, because they kind of agreed that they could borrow indefinitely. And now we as individuals are learning that there's never enough, but what you can afford is what you have to live with.

Till next year, anyway.